Out of the tower into the woods

The man worked a fire tower in the northern woods. He had done this for three years. His job was to watch for smoke and report it. Most days there was nothing to report.

On the evening of the 14th he saw a figure at the tree line.

It was distant. Far enough that he could not make out anything specific about it through his binoculars. Just a shape. Standing still at the edge of the trees a long way off. He watched it for several minutes. It did not move. He knew he should stay in the tower. The tree line was far and the light was going. He set the binoculars down and when he looked again it was gone.

He climbed down anyway and walked toward where the figure had been. It took him much longer to reach the tree line than he expected. There was nothing there. No tracks he could identify. He stood at the tree line for a while and then walked back to the tower.

He picked up the radio and reported what he saw.

Static.

He tried again. Static.

He set the radio down and sat in his chair by the window for the rest of the day. At some point he noticed it had gotten dark. He noticed also that the wolves had not howled. They howled every night without exception. He waited. They did not howl. There was no wind. No insects. No sound from the forest at all.

He sat with this for a while. Then he got up and walked down the stairs, out of the tower into the woods.

He did not know the trail he took. He was not sure it was a trail at all.

The dark came in quickly between the trees. He walked and the woods got thicker and he did not turn back. He walked for a long time. Long enough that he stopped expecting the trees to thin out. He did not hear anything. No wind. No animals. His own footsteps sounded quieter

than they should have on the dry ground. He did not know where he was going. He kept walking anyway.

At some point he realized he had no idea where the tower was behind him.

He kept walking.

He did not see the well. He walked into the stone base of it in the dark and stumbled forward, catching himself on the edge.

He steadied himself and looked up. Under the small roof above it, nailed to the wood, was a photograph of him. He was standing with a smile at the top of his tower. Somebody had taken it.

He reached for it. He fell.

The bottom was dry. He was not injured. At least he wasn’t pushed the man thought.

He looked up. The opening above him showed sky but no stars. No moon. Just dark.

He waited for morning. Morning did not come. The man sat with his back against the stone wall and flipped over the photo of himself. He found It read John.

He was confused as this was not his name.

The sky above stayed the same.

He sat in the well for a long time.

Every once in a while, footsteps would be heard on the ground above. They would approach and pass and continue. They never slowed.

The silence was too much.

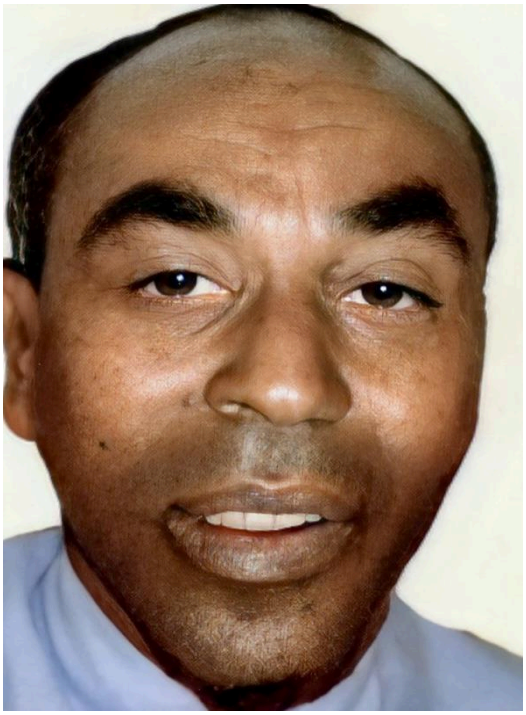
At some point he began to dig. When the hole was deep enough he lay down in it, even though he knew it meant never returning to the tower.

No one would know of his absence.

The man knew this.

The sky above the well stayed dark.

And the footsteps above kept on.



This story is dedicated to the thousands of individuals in the NamUs and ViCAP databases who left this world without a name attached. Some were found. Some were not. All of them were someone.The Brewster County John Doe. Found 1986. Identity unknown. He is one of thousands.

(Facial reconstruction of unidentified male “Brewster John Doe” based on forensic analysis)